

Homily for the Ascension of the Lord, Year A

May 21, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11 (The Ascension.)

Responsory: Psalm 47 (God mounts his throne to shouts of joy.)

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:17-23 (God seated him at his right hand in the heavens.)

Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20 (Commissioning of the Apostles.)

Every year, the Feast of the Ascension features *two accounts* of our Lord appearing to his disciples for the last time, before he ascends into the heavens. The first reading is always taken from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. It presents the post-resurrection timeline that all of us know, and which has been enshrined in the Church's liturgical calendar for centuries. According to that timeline, the Risen Jesus appears several times to his disciples over a period of forty days, mostly in and around Jerusalem. Then he gathers the Eleven for a final exhortation, in which he tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come down upon them and empower them to become his witnesses to the whole world. At the conclusion of that exhortation, Jesus ascends, never to be seen again. Then, ten days later, the Holy Spirit comes, as promised, and the disciples go out and proclaim the Gospel, as instructed. Thus begins the story of the Church.

The second account of the Ascension always comes from the conclusion of one of the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark or Luke. Because the gospels are the story of *Jesus*, we might expect them to end with Jesus rising up to heaven in the sight of his disciples. However, none of these gospel accounts match up with the timeline in the Acts of the Apostles. Matthew's version, which we heard today, is the most distinctive of all, because it is so compact. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus remains quite aloof after the Resurrection. He appears only briefly to the women at the tomb and instructs them to go and tell his disciples to meet him in Galilee. Then, the first and only time that the Eleven see him is in this very brief encounter on a mountaintop somewhere in Galilee, several days later. Matthew says, "When they saw him, they *worshipped*, but they *doubted*," probably because the last time they saw Jesus, he was hanging dead on a cross! Jesus wastes no time. He doesn't even bother with a greeting. He simply proclaims that "all power in heaven and earth" has been given to him, and he instructs them to, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Then, he makes them a solemn promise: "And behold, *I am with you always*, until the end of the age." Thus ends the Gospel according to Matthew.

Both of these accounts look like commissioning ceremonies. The primary emphasis is not on Jesus, who is departing, but on the disciples, who receive a new mandate from Jesus to go out and make disciples of all the nations. This is the moment when the Eleven cease to be merely *disciples* and take on their new identity as *apostles*, meaning, "those who are sent." Matthew doesn't tell us how they reacted to Jesus' instructions or to his sudden departure, which Matthew doesn't even bother to narrate. The Acts of the Apostles, on the other hand,

paints the Ascension scene in much greater detail. And what it shows us is a group of disciples who seem confused about what has just happened and unsure about what they're supposed to do next.

They ask Jesus, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" That question reveals their misguided assumptions about the Messiah. The disciples and everyone else who believed that Jesus was the Messiah anticipated that he had come to restore the Kingdom of Israel to its former glory under King David. When Jesus died, it looked as though that dream had died with him. But, when he came back to life, it appeared that the debacle of Holy Week was just a temporary setback, overturned by the mighty power of God. With the last obstacle to his reign overcome, Jesus could now establish his glorious kingdom on earth.

Of course, we know that they were mistaken. Jesus' passion and death on the cross did not interrupt his mission; *they were his mission*. Jesus was sent into the world to conquer death, to establish an everlasting kingdom *not of this earth*, and to open the way to eternal life for all believers. On the cross, he accomplished all that he was sent to do. Now it was time for his disciples to pick up where he left off and proclaim the Good News to all the world. According to Acts, the disciples don't exactly jump into action right away. They stand there speechless, dumbfounded, staring up into the sky, perhaps wondering how Jesus is going to restore the kingdom to Israel now that he's gone. They still don't understand that *his* work is done, but *theirs* is just beginning.

The Ascension serves as both the *conclusion* to the story of Jesus and the *beginning* of the story of the Church. It marks the transition point when the mission of Jesus *becomes* the mission of the Church. That's why Jesus' last words to his disciples, as recorded by Matthew, are so crucial: "*I am with you always, until the end of the age.*" Even though Jesus will no longer be *physically* present to his disciples as they go out on mission, he *will* accompany them wherever they go. Once ascended, Jesus could fulfill that promise for all of his disciples, even as they scattered to the four winds to proclaim the Good News to all creation.

With the Ascension, God's covenant with his people entered a new phase, in which the Lord would make his presence felt, among *all* his disciples, in an entirely new way. Ironically, by departing from this earth, Jesus could be *closer* to his disciples than ever before, empowering them to carry his message far beyond the limited area that he had been able to reach during his lifetime. The Apostles just needed to understand that *the message had now been entrusted to them*. From that point forward, Jesus would speak and act only *through them*. His Holy Spirit, dwelling in them, would enable them to be his evangelists and witnesses to the world.

We also possess that same "spirit of wisdom and revelation," of which St. Paul speaks in his Letter to the Ephesians, resulting in knowledge of Christ. Furthermore, we also were *commissioned*, through the sacrament of Baptism, to participate in the threefold mission of Christ as priest, prophet and king. Hence, just like those *first* disciples on the day of our Lord's Ascension, *we* are sent into the world to boldly continue where Christ and all of the disciples before us have left off. And we do so, confident that *he will be with us always*, "until the end of the age."